

Top Ten Takeaways

Anxiety and Depression in the Classroom and at Home

Dr. Nadja Reilly

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1. **A child's aches and pains are real. Address them.** Anxiety in children often manifests itself with a stomachache, headache, shortness of breath, irritability or difficulty concentrating. Acknowledge and empathize with your child's feelings; Talk with them about what they are feeling and if they have a sense of what might be causing it.
2. **Teach your child to do a total body scan.** Often, the physical signs of anxiety will occur before a child or parent recognizes the problem. Give control back to your child by explaining that their body is telling them something. Have them express what they feel so they can learn to regulate their emotions. Deep breathing and muscle relaxation are great ways to process those aches and pains! Process first and problem solve later.
3. **Listen and validate.** An adult's response to a child's worries can either diminish or worsen the problem. Listen to your child's concerns rather than dismiss them. After acknowledging how they feel, ask "What would be helpful to you right now?" and help them problem-solve. With adolescents and teens who may not directly verbalize anxiety, watch for key behaviors: irritability, boredom, fatigue, increased fighting with siblings and listen for key words and phrases that may signal worries: "things never work out," "this always happens," "___ is so stupid," "I should've," "it's a total disaster," "why bother?"
4. **Learn to recognize the difference between a child's specific and appropriate fear vs. a more generalized dread that something will go wrong across a variety of settings.** Anxiety and depression are two of the most common mental health problems in children, with the average age of onset at 11 years and sometimes occurring as early as preschool. Half of kids with anxiety can develop other mood disorders if not treated.
5. **Communicate with teachers.** Children with anxiety issues have diminished processing capabilities because they're worried about something other than the task at hand. They may be disorganized and have trouble with assignments. Check in with the teacher to assess what they are seeing in the classroom and determine if your child needs some additional support at school or with homework.

6. **No shame in that!** Children with anxiety and depression often feel shame. They may fear being judged by others or embarrassing themselves. They may isolate themselves to avoid social interactions. While efforts are underway to remove the stigma of all kinds of mental health issues, it can be uncomfortable to talk about. Don't avoid the subject; talk about it openly so your child feels more comfortable and accepting of the feelings. Help your child find activities in which they can confidently participate.
7. **Get active.** Avoidance is the default response for children and teens dealing with anxiety and depression. Teach them ACTIVE coping skills so they can learn to help themselves. Simple approaches, like taking a walk outside or interacting with their environment and people in the community, can be effective. Exercise is one of the best ways to counteract the effects of anxiety and depression.
8. **Talk therapy or medication?** For children diagnosed with some moderate to severe mental health issues, medication AND talk therapy together can be effective. Talk to your physician about monitoring the use and efficacy of medication, particularly anti-depressants which can have strong side effects. Giving a child drugs without talk therapy is only addressing half the problem.
9. **Build resilience factors.** (Sorry – resilience should ideally not be used as adjective) Show your child unconditional love and acceptance. Love them for who they are, not what they do. Create strong family traditions and/or cultural roots and provide opportunities to develop spirituality. Encourage them to get involved with teams, clubs and groups to reinforce social/community support systems and relationships. Show them they have a safety net and identify whom they can rely on.
10. **It's a family affair.** When one member of a family is struggling, everyone feels it. Involve family members and other important people in your child's life in your plan to address anxiety and depression. Recognize the importance of good sleep, mindfulness, opportunities to communicate and balance in your family. Identify triggers and develop responses to tolerate stress and distress. Most importantly, preserve your relationship with the child that's experiencing anxiety or depression and give them time to work through the process of dealing with it.